In celebration of our centenary year, we've been encouraging all of our supporters and programme participants to speak up and make their voice heard (see page 18). We checked in with some of our contributors to find out what they'd like to change

What would you **speak out** about?

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN

I think climate change is a pretty important issue but, let's be honest, 'climate change' is a rubbish phrase – nobody cares about the climate and 'change' sounds vaguely positive. What it really is is 'terrorist weather'; it's weather that can happen out of the blue and cause massive damage so that's what we should call it. We need to change the conversation, and to change our behaviour more than anything else.

––––

Abie is a comedian and broadcaster who took part in the Schools' and International Mace in 2000. You can read his story on page 40.

JORDAN ERICA WEBBER

I would speak out about the fact that some people get fewer opportunities than others just because of the colour of their skin, their birthplace, their gender, their sexual orientation, or any number of things that are beyond their control.

––––

Jordan is a writer and presenter and current host of *The Guardian's* digital culture podcast *Chips With Everything*. You can read her take on how social media is both a help and a hindrance to free speech on page 16.

SHERRY TURKLE

Soon, sociable robots and digital pets will be able to convince us that they are able to be empathetic by passing an emotional version of the Turing Test. When we offer such objects to our children, we embark on an experiment in which our children are the human subjects. Will we be honest enough to confront the emotional downside of living out our robot dreams?

––––

Sherry has spent the last 30 years studying the psychology of people's relationships with technology. You can read an extract from her latest book, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, on page 34.

DOUG CHAYKA

As an editorial illustrator I want to make images that shine a light on concentrations of power. I'm concerned with the enormous inequality (racial, gender and economic) in the US and how our government fails all of us by not protecting the weakest as well as the privileged. I hope my work can bring attention to these problems.

––––

Doug is a New Jersey-based illustrator whose smart, graphic collage images have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers including *The Atlantic, The New York Times, The New Yorker* and *The Washington Post*. You can see his work on page 16.
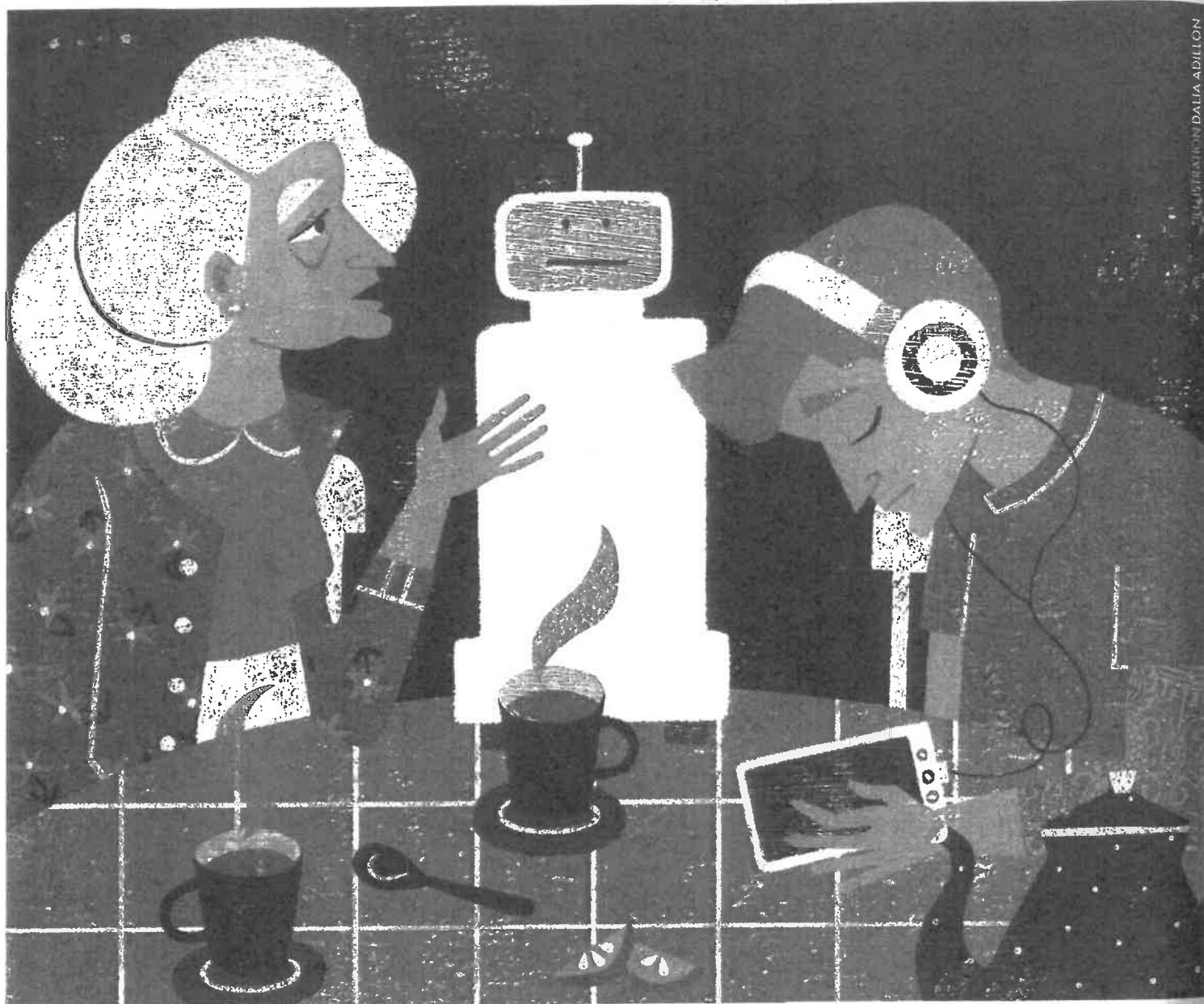
Will voice-technologies render us mute?

There has been much made of technology's deleterious effects on dialogue. But what should we make of the rise of voice-assisted 'caring' robots? Is the speech they elicit enough to rekindle the art of conversation, or the final nail in its coffin? **Sherry Turkle**, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, shares her thoughts

Many people tell me they hope that someday an advanced version of Siri will be like a best friend. One who will listen when others won't. I believe this reflects a painful truth: the feeling that 'no one is listening to me' plays a large part in our relationships with technology. That's why it is so appealing to have a Facebook page or a Twitter feed – so many automatic listeners. And that feeling that 'no one is listening to me' makes us want to spend time with machines that seem to care about us. We take their performances of caring and conversation at 'interface value'.

In the course of my research, there was

one moment that I have never forgotten because it changed my mind. I had been bringing robots designed as companions for the elderly into nursing homes and to elderly people living on their own to explore the possibilities. One day I saw an older woman who had lost a child talking to a robot in the shape of a baby seal. It seemed to be looking in her eyes; to be following the conversation. It comforted her. Many people on my research team and who worked at the nursing home thought this was amazing.

This woman was trying to make sense of her loss with a machine that put on a good show. And we're vulnerable: people experience even pretend empathy as the real thing. But robots can't empathise. They don't face death or know life. So when this woman took comfort in her robot companion, I didn't find it amazing. I felt we had abandoned her. Being part of this scene was one of the most wrenching moments in my then 15 years of research on sociable robotics.

For me, it was a turning point: I felt the enthusiasm of my team and of the staff and the attendants. There were so many people there to help, but we all stood back, observers hoping that an elder would bond with a machine. It seemed that we all had a stake in outsourcing the thing we do best – understanding each other, taking care of each other.

That day in the nursing home, I was troubled by how we allowed ourselves to be sidelined, turned into spectators by a robot that understood nothing. It reflected poorly on us and how we think about older people when they try to tell the stories of their lives. Over the past decades, when the idea of older people and robots has come up, the emphasis has been on whether the older person will talk to the robot. Will the robot facilitate their talking? Will the robot be persuasive enough to do that?

But when you think about the moment of life we are considering, it is not just that older people are supposed to be talking. *Younger people are supposed to be listening.* This is the contract between generations. Some older cultures have a saying: when a young person misbehaves, it means that 'they had no one to tell them the old stories'. When we celebrate robot listeners that cannot listen, we show too little interest in what our elders have to say. We build machines that guarantee that human stories will fall upon deaf ears.

There are so many wonderful things that robots can do to help the elderly. They can help older people (or the ill or homebound) feel greater independence by reaching for cans or clothing on high shelves; robots can help shaky hands cook. Robots can

> 'What is the value of an interaction that contains no shared experience of life and contributes nothing to a shared store of human meaning – and indeed may devalue it?'

help to lower an unsteady body onto a bed, or locate a mislaid pair of glasses. All of these things seem so much for the good. Some argue that a robot chatting with an older person is also unequivocally for the good. But here, I think we need to carefully consider the human specificity of conversation and emotional care.

Sociable robots act as evocative objects – objects that cause us to reflect on ourselves and our deepest values. Talking with machines forces the question: what is the value of an interaction that contains no shared experience of life and contributes nothing to a shared store of human meaning – and indeed may devalue it? This is not a question with a ready answer. But this is a question worth asking and returning to.

It is not easy to have this kind of conversation once we start to take the idea of robotic companionship seriously. Once we assume it as the new normal, this conversation begins to disappear.

Right now we work on the premise that putting in a robot to do a job is always better than nothing. The premise is flawed. It's part of a general progression that begins with resignation, with the idea that machine companionship is better than nothing, as in 'there are no people for these jobs'. From there, we exalt the possibilities of what simulation can offer until, in time, we start to talk as though what we will get from the artificial may actually be better that what life could ever provide. But if you have a problem with care and companionship and you try to solve it with a robot, you may not try to solve it with your friends, your family, and your community.

The as-if self of a robot calling forth the as-if self of a person performing for it – this is not helpful for children as they grow up. It is not helpful for adults as they try to live authentically.

And to say that it is just the thing for older people who are at that point where they are often trying to make sense of their lives is demeaning. They, of all people, should be given occasions to talk about their real lives, filled with real losses and real loves, to someone who knows what those things are. ●

This is an edited extract from Reclaiming Conversation, The Power of Talk in a Digital Age *by Sherry Turkle (Penguin)*
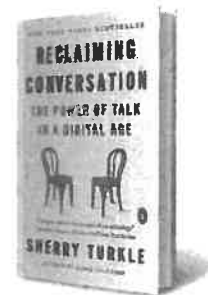
WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you think Facebook, Twitter etc help us to feel listened to? Could you imagine ever wanting to talk to a robot instead of a friend? Do you think we're in danger of losing the art of conversation, or can robots help us rekindle it? Please email us at yourviews@esu.org or tweet @theesu

DIAL●GUE

100 YEARS
of communicating
for a brighter future

ALUMNI STORIES
KT Tunstall
Anita Anand
Edward Stourton
Sir Nicholas Mostyn
Abie Philbin Bowman

THE FUTURE OF ORACY
Will voice technologies
render us mute?

**VOICES AROUND
THE WORLD**
How the International
Public Speaking Competition
has changed lives

1●●

ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
discovering voices   changing lives   1918-2018